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SUBJECT: NEW ARRIVALS CHANGING CYPRUS'S BI-COMMUNAL
CHARACTER

REF: A. 07 NICOSIA 15
[B. 07 NICOSIA 52](#)
[C. 07 NICOSIA 124](#)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: An island long accustomed to exporting human capital, Cyprus has witnessed an unprecedented wave of immigration in the last ten years, altering the historically bi-communal (Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot) demographic balance and potentially affecting the Republic's political landscape longer-term. These new minorities outnumber the country's "official" Armenian, Maronite and Latin minorities (Reftels) by a significant margin; reputable media report a legal migrant population in Cyprus of over 100,000 and estimate the illegal population at 60,000. Of the largest communities, the Filipinos and Sri Lankans have focused on improving their short-term economic lot and shown little interest in politics, while the Pontian Greeks, who in many cases hold EU passports and enjoy limited voting rights, have put down roots and begun to organize politically. Part I of a two-installment series, this telegram focuses on these new arrivals while Part II will discuss non-Cypriot EU citizen residents (other than Pontians) and additional immigrant groups. End Summary.

The Overall Migrant Picture

[1](#)2. (SBU) At the time of Cyprus's 1960 independence from Great Britain, the island's 580,000 population was 79 percent Greek-Cypriot, 18 percent Turkish-Cypriot, and three percent "other" -- British expats, mainly. Out-migration of citizens from both communities had begun before independence, mainly for economic reason, but spiked after the commencement of inter-communal fighting in 1963, with Turkish Cypriots perceiving threats to their physical security and limited opportunities to make a living. After 1974, significant numbers of Turkish mainlanders -- the so-called "settlers" -- relocated to Cyprus, many for personal economic reasons but some due to Turkey's political decision to repopulate the north with ethnic Turks. By the mid-nineties, the island's population, while having grown substantially over 35 years, remained predominantly bi-communal, or at least bi-ethnic.

[1](#)3. (U) With the government-controlled area's continuing economic boom and the commencement of European Union accession negotiations with Cyprus in 1998, emigration waned and foreigners began seeing Cyprus as a more attractive destination. Further, full EU accession in 2004 meant EU citizens could relocate freely to Cyprus. According to an August 3 article in the reputable English-language daily

"Cyprus Mail," some 50,000 non-Cypriot EU citizens and 60,000 foreigners from other nations legally reside on the island; the illegal population is estimated at 50-60,000. (Note: official figures from 2005 place the total population of the government-controlled area at over 780,000.)

Cyprus's Filipinos -- Domestic Helpers, Disinterested

¶4. (SBU) One of the most visible "new minorities" in Cyprus are the Filipinos. Esther Beatty, formerly the president of the Philippine Association in Nicosia, estimates their numbers at 11,000, 90 percent of whom are women aged 25 to ¶45. Most work as domestic servants, while others are employed in restaurants or as crew on Cypriot-flagged vessels. By nature, the Filipino community is quite fragmented, owing to differences in members' native tongues, religious denomination, and home island. Yet contacts claim they still "watch out for their own." This social safety net sometimes fails, however. Rita Superman, director of the Cyprus Police's Anti-Trafficking Unit, noted that Filipinos comprised the single largest group of trafficking victims in 2007 (nine out of 40 identified victims).

¶5. (SBU) According to Beatty, most resident Filipinos do not gravitate towards political activism. Even long-term residents, who may have acquired citizenship via marriage to Cypriot men, tend to keep their political beliefs to themselves in order to preserve family harmony. Most Filipino community leaders have shied away from aligning themselves with any Cypriot political party or movement, fearing that such allegiance might harm them were political

winds to change somehow. Beatty acknowledged that, should Cypriot residency regulations change in order to harmonize with EU directives -- allowing more Filipinos to become legal long-term residents and eventually, citizens -- they conceivably could become a more potent political force. "At this point, however, they're just not interested," she concluded.

Sri Lankans Much the Same

¶6. (SBU) The Sri Lankans, numbering approximately 14,000, are similarly visible in Cyprus, especially on Sundays, when they congregate in parks in the island's larger cities. According to Tiru Chelvam, a translator with the Cypriot Asylum Service, 90 percent of his compatriots arrive on Cyprus as economic migrants or students, and many file for political asylum "defensively" after their labor contracts end. Most Sri Lankans speak at least some English, labor as domestic help or construction workers, and practice Catholicism or Buddhism. A majority are Sinhalese, Chelvam continued, as Tamils generally migrated to larger European countries where they had more work options and did not feel cornered and vulnerable to conflict with their Sinhalese compatriots.

¶7. (SBU) The Sri Lankan migrants in Cyprus differ from the Filipinos in that more are male, but they, too, are poorly organized politically, due mainly to their short stays on the island and/or abnormal residency status. They have established two welfare organizations that tend to the flock and attempt to represent the group before Cypriot authorities, but they are poorly funded and many residents consider them corrupt. Even respected leaders like Chelvam, who earns a decent wage from his work with the government, hopes to go to Canada, "where opportunities for Sri Lankan immigrants are better."

Pontian Greeks Have One Leg Up

¶8. (SBU) The Pontians, ethnically Greek and hailing originally from the Black Sea region, also number around

15-20,000 and are concentrated mainly in the Paphos region southwest of Nicosia. Pontians are Orthodox and many continue to speak a dialect incomprehensible to other Greeks in addition to their native Russian or Turkish. They began arriving on the island in 1993; most originally had emigrated to Greece, as GoG policy then (and now) was to offer citizenship to diaspora persons of "proven" Greek ethnicity. Many Pontians, especially those from the post-USSR breakup migrant wave, did not integrate smoothly into Greek society and a minority turned to criminality and other "anti-social behavior." Perhaps unfairly, Pontians here have a poor reputation, with many Cypriots blaming them for a recent increase in crime on the island.

¶9. (SBU) According to Raoul Tsahidis, the general secretary of the Greek Pontian Organization in Cyprus and a representative to the World Council of Greeks of Pontus, there are approximately 14,000 Pontians in Cyprus holding Greek citizenship, and another 3,000 Pontians whose applications are pending. Unlike many other immigrants to Cyprus, the Pontians tended to arrive as whole families, and their communities are tightly-knit. Further, they feel the island is their home, not a temporary place of employment. Labor leader and prominent Pontian Maya Pozidou argued that most of her compatriots, contrary to reputation, were hard-working and well-educated, and cited an unverified statistic that 70 percent of the economy of Paphos depends on them. Most Pontians work in the tourism and construction sectors, but the Greek Pontian Organization is trying to secure government jobs for its members as well.

¶10. (U) With a designated community representative and some grass-roots mobilization, the Pontian Greeks are perhaps the most politically well-organized new minority on the island. Their main focus has been to secure Greek citizenship for the 3,000 Pontians in Cyprus whose applications with Athens are pending (they also are aggressively courted by Greek political parties such as ND and PASOK, which flew thousands home to vote in recent Greek elections). On-island, they hope to secure representation in Parliament, either by

electing one of their own via the normal route, or by securing a non-voting, community representative slot ala the Maronites, Armenians, and Latins (whom they greatly outnumber). They even hope to capture one of Cyprus's six European Parliament seats in the EP's June 2009 elections. (Note: unless the Pontians acquire Cypriot, vice Greek citizenship, they will not be able to vote or stand in Cypriot parliamentary and presidential elections. Like other non-Cypriot EU residents, however, they can participate in municipal and EU elections.)

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Comprising a significant percentage of the government-controlled area's population, Cyprus's non-Cypriot communities are already changing the character of the island.

While many indeed will return home once their labor contracts expire or their asylum claims fail, others, especially the Pontians, are here to stay. Long-term, their presence could spur a redefinition of what it means to be Cypriot -- with the exception of the Pontians, the others are unlikely to self-identify with either the G/C or T/C communities, as Cyprus's "official" minorities had to do in ¶1960. Such separation of ethnicity from citizenship would seem a good thing on an island attempting to reunify.

¶12. (SBU) Of the three groups discussed here, the Pontians have the greatest chance of integration into Cyprus's close-knit society, owing to their (almost) common language and Orthodoxy, and the permanence that comes with their EU passports. Surprisingly, while they identify with G/Cs vis-a-vis the Cyprus Problem, they aren't particularly nationalist in the mode of overseas Greek Cypriots or members of the Greek diaspora; leader Tsahidis compared the "national issue" to a football match -- worth watching, but life would go on regardless of outcome.

